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ABSTRACT

This study examined faculty experience with student academic unpreparedness at two open-admission universities in the southern United States. Fourteen faculty from core subject areas, such as English, history, and mathematics, completed open-ended interviews on the effects of student unpreparedness. Faculty discussed the basic problems and dilemmas associated with academic unpreparedness, such as the lack of basic knowledge and skills among many incoming students, lack of student motivation, a passive approach to learning on the part of many students, and poor student coping behaviors. They also spoke to problems associated with administrative support, such as the lack of teaching resources and lack of effective leadership on the part of administrators. The faculty then discussed responses and coping strategies that they used to overcome problems associated with student unpreparedness, such as remedial instruction, flexibility, creative interaction with students, less breadth and more depth in courses, lowering of standards, role ambiguity, and job dissatisfaction. Faculty also discussed the dilemma of an open-admissions university upholding academic standards. (Contains 15 references.) (MDM)

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The Impact of Underprepared Students on
Regular College Faculty

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THE IMPACT OF UNDERPREPARED STUDENTS ON REGULAR COLLEGE FACULTY

Review of Related Literature

Relatively few studies have focused on the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of faculty members toward remediation (Farrow, 1986) and toward underprepared students in general. Early studies on faculty and remediation which focused on faculty who taught remedial courses were peripheral in terms of their relevance to this study (Farrow; Harris, 1984; Hill, 1984; Holland, 1984; Spickelmier, 1973)

Several studies conducted between the late 1960s and mid-1980s focused on community college faculty. Weber (1968) studied English programs in five community colleges in Michigan and reported that faculty appreciated the need for remedial programs but that they and department chairpersons alike were skeptical about the effectiveness of remedial programs.

Field research on expectations and goals of community college social science students, faculty, and administrators was conducted by Mason (1978) in an attempt to assess the strain a public community college experienced in trying to offer second chance education and cooling out (asking low performance students to drop a course) at the same time. Academically underprepared students were very much in evidence at the community college under study. Mason found that students' "academic ability was far below what one would expect to find in an average college freshman class" (p. 11). The majority of faculty members wanted to evaluate students on the basis of national norms and to keep academic standards at a respectable level. Although they supported separate remedial courses, they opposed remediation within regular academic disciplinary courses. "Students," however, "did not wish to take remedial courses. Rather they wanted, and at times demanded remediation within the regular course work" (p. 12).

London (1982) described standards in community colleges and offered two

reasons for their decline, one of which had to do with the ambiguous state of community college faculty.

There is a growing body of literature testifying to the frustrations many community college teachers have in defining their roles. To meet the needs and problems of high-risk or untraditional students, there has been over the past two decades an enormous increase in new programs, pedagogies and instructional technologies, all of which community college faculty have had to familiarize themselves. (p.7)

Faculty were having difficulty in defining their roles because of frustrations and difficulties associated with having to lower their standards for instruction and grading to accommodate the general student population.

Other options involve teaching the course with eyes half closed and giving passing grades with almost certain knowledge that students have not done the work, diluting the course and teaching at a reduced level of abstraction and complexity, not teaching the course as advertised but instead concentrating on basic skills, or trying to ignore the problem by assigning easier reading, less writing and more objective examinations in order to avoid students' writing problems. (p. 10)

Surveying instructors at a California community college, Cohen (1986) noted that faculty perceptions of the teaching environment were affected by the presence of remedial students. Cohen stated:

When asked what were the biggest problems they faced in teaching their classes, instructor responses were surprisingly consistent. For most instructors, the greatest problem in teaching was the audience. Teachers become quite demoralized when students take a class to get a grade yet are unwilling to work for it. Most teachers are upset at the significant numbers of students they feel do not belong in a college class, but come to school to socialize, or because they are subsidized if they stay in school, or because they just don't know what else to do with themselves. (p. 15)

Seidman (1986) examined the problems and challenges confronting community college teachers. The chronic strain experienced by faculty members in their efforts to meet diverse student needs while maintaining high academic standards was forcefully revealed. Community college faculty were greatly concerned about the verbal

performance of their students, especially in reading and writing. These deficiencies apparently presented increasingly difficult problems for teachers across the curriculum. Poor verbal performance among students in general was perceived to be related to a trend toward less writing and more emphasis on objective, machine-scored tests. The key issue seemed to be the strain associated with the maintenance of academic integrity.

There have been few studies of 4-year college faculty and student academic underpreparedness. Stahl (1983) surveyed faculty at the University of Pittsburgh to determine their attitudes and opinions regarding the basic academic skill levels of undergraduates. Over one half of the respondents felt that student competency in basic skills had decreased, the greatest losses being in the language arts. Despite the fact that about 74% of the faculty members felt that institutions of higher education should provide corrective services for academically deficient students, most preferred to stay out of what they perceived as the remedial aspects of higher education. Many, however, expressed willingness to undergo inservice training to improve their ability to help underprepared students. Almost one quarter of the respondents had lowered their course requirements to accommodate achievement levels of entering undergraduate students.

Clark (1987) offered a sweeping account of the American academic profession based on interviews conducted with 170 faculty from six disciplines in six types of higher education institutions. Comments about remedial needs of students were a salient feature of many of the narratives. "Everywhere comments about (a) money and (b) poorly prepared students were prominent" (p. 221).

Boyer's (1987) 3-year study of colleges and universities shed light on the faculty experience with academic underpreparedness. "We repeatedly heard," he reported, "faculty members complain that their students are unprepared to do college-level work" (p. 73). Summarizing, he said, "More than half the faculty

nationwide rated the academic preparation of students at their institutions only fair to poor" (p. 74). Boyer discussed the disparity that seemed to exist between what teachers expected of the classroom experience, in terms of student preparedness and willingness to engage in the academic enterprise, and what they experienced in reality. "What we found in many classrooms was a mismatch between faculty and student expectations, a gap that left both parties unfulfilled" (p. 140).

Methods

This study explored the faculty experience with student academic underpreparedness at two open-admission universities in the South. The study was guided by a single research question: How do faculty at open admission universities define, manage and interpret their experience with student academic underpreparedness? As the research question suggests, the aim of the study was to contribute to a broad, holistic understanding of that experience. Therefore, a qualitative research design was used.

Data were collected through open-ended interviews. Participants were drawn from core-subject areas (e.g., English, history, mathematics) Several days prior to being interviewed, participants were made aware of the purpose of the study and were asked to give the matter some thought. During the actual interviews, which usually lasted from 1-2 hours, each participant was asked some general questions and encouraged to talk about any topic of interest judged to be relevant. The intent was to gain access to the meaning the participants themselves attached to their encounter with the problem of academic underpreparedness and to allow them to identify and discuss the salient features of that experience in their own terms (Seidman, 1986).

Fourteen interviews were conducted. They were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analyzed and interpreted using qualitative methods applicable to open-ended interview data (Patton, 1990; Seidman, 1986; Wolcott, 1982). The result was a descriptive account synthesized from the self-reported experiences of

the 14 participants.

The Research Findings

Three major categories or themes were identified from the data analysis: (a) basic problems and dilemmas associated with academic underpreparedness, (b) responses and coping strategies employed to deal with problems and dilemmas, and (c) opinions, values, and feelings relevant to salient issues.

Basic Problems and Dilemmas

All of the teachers expressed the view that the poor academic preparation of students in general constitutes a major problem. The majority saw themselves as being significantly affected by it, both professionally and personally. Data analysis revealed two sub-categories: (a) problems associated with student characteristics and behaviors and (b) problems associated with administrative support.

Problems Associated with Student Characteristics and Behaviors

Participants described a number of student characteristics and behaviors which affect the teaching environment. Although there was much talk of the basic knowledge and skill levels of students, respondents invariably framed the problem of academic underpreparedness in a way that took into account the affective as well as the cognitive domains of learning. Participants' perceptions of prevailing student attitudes, motivation and general orientation toward the learning experience were mentioned often and were clearly regarded as essential and interactive components of the participants' overall experience with underprepared students.

Basic knowledge and skill levels. Participants expressed concern about the general knowledge and academic skill levels of students and described those deficiencies as quite serious and pervasive. Despite their wish that students be better prepared, faculty did not seem to have a false or overly idealized conception of what students should know and be able to do. They also seemed to appreciate the student-centered ethos that goes with the special mission of open-door colleges. All respondents expressed similar views.

A lot of these students....never really were educated...read very poorly and without expression, as if they don't really understand what they're reading. (G.7.3)

I'm expected to teach at a particular level and I'm always having to move that level back or down. They're not prepared, they're not writing...at a college level.... (H.7.3)

One of the things that I have noticed in some 27 years of teaching is that at one time professors could assume that students arriving at the university would possess a core of basic knowledge, and so we had something to build on. Now...they're here almost as a blank tablet. (J.2.3)

While all respondents expressed some concern about the academic skills of students in the lower level classes, the majority were quite concerned about the general level of skills in upper level courses as well.

The writing problems persist all the way through. Even in my most advanced class I'm still finding comma splices and subject-verb disagreement.... (C.9.2)

I would have graduating seniors [pause] that I don't see how they got through any course.... They're not what I would consider somebody that should have a college degree.... They've been passed all along, I think... (G.14.1)

A lot of students, uh, don't read. That's our biggest concern, you see. You've got to read to build your vocabulary.... In my upper level courses I do require them to write a book review which is a formal project.... Yet you'll have students...violate all the rules of conventional writing. And, some of them are so bad, uh, that they don't know that every sentence has at least a subject and a verb. (J.4.1)

Student Attitudes and Motivation. There was a general conviction that growing numbers of students simply are not properly disposed to learn. Complaints about student attitudes and motivation were frequent. Several subjects expressed particular dismay and consternation with regard to certain attitudes which they saw as having adverse effects on students' motivation and the general academic environment.

They're a little bit more...laid back [laugh].... We used to emphasize, uh, get the education, get a good job, uh, be productive.... But, now...that kind of motivational drive seems to be absent in some instances.... (F.2.1)

They don't have that sense of wanting to learn just for the sake of learning, and uh, they'll snicker if you start getting involved, getting excited about what you're teaching.... And, it's usually the ones who are not prepared for college.

And, I find that they tend if you do try and comment on their paper or you do end up having to give them a low grade because they're not writing at the level that you want, that they resent that rather than work towards fixing it. (H.3.1)

Those kinds of attitudes were seen by some as evidence of a shift away from learning for its own sake toward an emphasis on material things.

There's an underlying concept, and it's all for money.... Almost all the papers are about money, saving...I'm going to school so that I can get a good job and make lots of money. (H.5.9)

Subjects found their work complicated by the fact that many students are not only underprepared academically but also undermotivated. Although subjects' perceptions of the severity of the problem varied, the general uniformity of opinion was notable.

It's bad enough if students are underprepared. That in itself presents a huge obstacle in terms of getting accomplished what you're supposed to accomplish. To have any hope of having a good class and keep the quality of learning up at a reasonable level for the majority of students, you're going to have to have those underprepared students—which I think is the majority now—they're going to have to be in there doing their part and then some. They're going to have to come to class, do all the assignments, pay attention, follow instructions. Those are motivational qualities that I look for, that you would expect as a minimum. But I can't say that I see much evidence of real motivation, generally speaking. (M.6.3)

The Passive Approach to Learning. This conviction that growing numbers of students simply are not disposed to learn was clearly evinced by participant assessments of student attitudes and behaviors such as passivity and caginess and their effects on the teaching experience. They frequently expressed concern and irritation regarding students' hesitance to become actively engaged in the learning process.

You have a group who, uh, seem like they're just [pause] there. They are...very passive. (F.1.7).

They run into something that baffles them and just seem to wait for you to come along and get them started again.... Many of those little problems or stumbling blocks they could have worked through themselves with a little thought and effort. I spend way too much time on that sort of thing. (M.5.2)

- Another manifestation of passive learning was a reluctance on the part of many students to pursue self-help strategies despite strong encouragement to do so.

Even though on my syllabus I mention a writing center that's open here at this

university to all students, they rarely take advantage of it, even if I write notes on their papers and say, "Go to the writing center," or "See me." I leave the option open.... In case they don't want that because they consider the writing center like humiliating or remedial, they can come to me privately. I have very few students who take advantage of that.... I offer suggestions on how to improve their writing, and I find very rarely do...the ones who are not prepared do the things that I ask them to do. (H.2.5)

Student Coping Behaviors. Participants' words also suggested that they were frustrated and dissatisfied beyond the level normally associated with the difference between teacher and student priorities and agendas. Their negative perceptions and feelings seemed to indicate a growing rift between faculty and students. Faculty expressed concern about the ways students deal with their own academic deficiencies.

The most common experience that I've been faced with is one of divisiveness by the students who undermine the learning itself in a formal setting. To become, uh, abrasive, uh, to become extremely vocal, almost unruly, in an attempt to disrupt the learning process, uh, which would allow that individual's deficiencies to be pinpointed.... The other is for a student to, over a period of time, to simply erase himself from that environment by not coming to class, uh, and eventually that student drops out or is forced to drop out of the institution because that individual normally recognizes that he or she is not prepared and decides to complete the existing semester never to return again.... The third thing that happens is the attempt to bribe the instructor. That happens in two forms most often. The guys tend to want to become your close friend and ally—hang around and talk, that kind of thing. The young ladies think that they can impress you with as much of their body as they can get away with. (A.1.1)

They compare you with others.... You get a bad reputation as a, uh, very hard teacher. (B.3.1)

They claim they don't understand. They wait till the last minute. They'll say you didn't say the test was today.... They...claim a family problem.... They didn't have their book.... They...claim I'm being too hard. (D.5.2)

Participants seemed to view these kinds of behaviors and strategies as being essentially negative and short-sighted, rather than forthright and reflective of a mature concern for improving one's capacity to perform academically.

Students today, I think, are more prone than ever and more adept at finding easy ways to get by. In the past that wasn't a problem. If they weren't up to par and they didn't bear down a little to compensate, they flunked out. Of course, that still happens, but it's a little different now. There's so many underprepared students who, I think, approach their own shortcomings in a shallow way—you

know, making excuses, doing sloppy work, being perfectly willing to accept the fact that they don't read and write very well, don't know what they should know, rather than trying to become a more academically oriented person, start working toward a long-term solution to the problem. And, I appreciate that in the case of a lot of students it's a big problem, making up for what is lacking. That is not easy to overcome. (M.6.3)

Many respondents spoke of student behaviors which are directed more at the teacher as an individual and are, consequently, more stressful. These more aggressive behaviors, such as criticizing, intimidating and blaming, seem to foster a student-teacher relationship that seems almost adversarial.

They're very adept at making you feel like the problem is with you...even after you give them all these opportunities.... They still don't do their part. (F.5.3)

They will, uh, claim I'm being too hard.... Sometimes they will, uh, attack...try to intimidate. All kinds of ploys. (D.5.2)

A particularly problematic student behavior identified was that a significant number of students do not buy textbooks or other materials for some courses. Students seem to recognize situations where they might be able to make their way through a course without a book. Some faculty saw such behavior as an attempt to create an environment where that behavior is tolerated and accommodated—a kind of student coping behavior that seems to involve subtle gamesmanship and posturing.

Many, many students don't buy the textbook. A good number of teachers...don't go by the textbook.... The students see this, and it carries over to other classes. They get to thinking that they can get by without buying the textbook and, if you require it, if it's really essential to your course, it's hard to get them out of that. (B.2.1)

Problems Associated with Administrative Support

The data indicated that administrative support can be a very positive factor affecting faculty members' experience with academic underpreparedness. Conversely, lack of administrative support can be a highly negative factor. This study found cases on both ends of the spectrum.

Resources. Subjects often expressed the belief that, in view of the numbers of

underprepared students they have in their classes; resources for teaching were inadequate.

I think...the institution should provide you with those things that will allow you to help make that student successful. Not just accept everybody and then turn their back and say do the best you can.... (A.2.6)

So many of these kids require uh—well, what it amounts to is academic reconstructive surgery. And to do that it takes a special kind of teaching skill, it takes resources, it takes time, and lots of it.... Some major changes would have to take place...in order to make some strides in that direction.... Who knows if that will ever happen. (M.2.3)

Participants described problems associated with large classes such as the compounding of the effects of underpreparedness when large segments of classes are underprepared. When the institution treats these students as though they require no special resources, it places a heavy burden on faculty members and puts many of them in an uncomfortable, compromising position. Teachers have difficulty in addressing course content they feel a need to cover, and there seems to be a significant watering-down effect on the class as a whole.

They [administrators] know that many of the students are going to come here underprepared, and they want to do everything they can to help them succeed.... I think that's a perfectly good mission. I think that a lot of English teachers wish that the students would get better training at the developmental, uh, level, so that when they come to us in their first college level English class we don't have to deal with this quite so much.... But, when the administration puts 45 students in a class, we know they have no concept of what it is we're trying to do and what it is we're up against. (C.3.4)

I think 50 students in a class, in a math class particularly, is just too many students to do anything effectively. (E.8.12)

Leadership in an Open Admission Environment. Subjects were generally understanding of administrators and appreciated the fact that people in leadership roles also face difficult problems and dilemmas. Nonetheless, several expressed doubts about the strength, boldness and creativity of the leadership that they saw being brought to bear on the uniquely challenging problems associated with academic underpreparedness.

I think the administration tends to run from it because it's not a politically wise position to take [more open acknowledgement and discussion of the problems associated with widespread student academic underpreparedness]. (A.4.11)

I think if the administration insisted that teachers teach what they're supposed to teach and stand firm on standards, it would be much better. But, if there are certain classes that the students know they can go in and get by, the system is weakened. If a student knew that when he came to class [pause] he was gonna have to study, he was gonna have to work, it would make a big difference. I'm not saying you should try and turn open-door colleges into Harvards—society comes in gradations, so do colleges—but we could do a lot better, uh, if the administration...stood behind us in demanding more of students. (D.7.1)

If you don't have solid commitment and backing from higher up, then trying to attack the problem in your own way in your own little corner of the world can be uh, risky. (M.4.3)

Much of what respondents said about the open-door dilemma could be related to a perceived lack of unity among those close to the problem and a perceived lack of general willingness to pursue more comprehensive solutions. Responses revealed an underlying lack of confidence in administrative commitment to take serious steps to ease the open-door dilemma which arises from the inherent conflict between meritocratic and egalitarian ideals. The majority of participants feared that the politicization of the issue serves to undermine more unified, comprehensive approaches to the problems that exist.

The fears, frustrations, and idealism of some respondents who obviously would like to see positive change take place but who see the political environment of the open-door college as a hindrance are illustrated by this comment.

The reward system does not tolerate dissent. And, at open admissions schools, and especially at a school like this where the president is a politician in the good ole [state name deleted] boy network, anybody who would be seen as a maverick, anybody who would voice, uh, opposition to the political policies here on campus would be ostracized and ultimately forced out. (N.5.1)

The inherent conflict between student underpreparedness and academic standards tends to create an uncomfortable situation for faculty members. Administrators play a key role in determining how teachers confront the predicament in which they find

themselves.

My department head...called me several times and asked me to go easier on students. He has asked me on several occasions to change a student's grade. I wouldn't do it. He got very angry with me. And, finally, he violated my academic freedom by going and changing a student's grade on his own.... You don't want to encourage teachers to be easy; you want to encourage them to be fair.... You have to have sensitive administrators, principled administrators who back you up in your efforts to improve the academic environment rather than just trying to avoid any trouble—you know, keep the students happy, avoid trouble. But, you can cater to the students too much, and when you do that you have a real problem. (B.5.4)

The data indicated that the majority of teachers in this study were sensitive to the behavior of leaders in an open admission environment, particularly department heads. The importance of the leader as a symbol of the academic ideals of the institution, regardless of the administrative level, emerged strongly as a key finding of this study. Based on the interview data, it was concluded that teachers were bolstered by strong, openly supportive leaders who symbolized integrity, innovativeness, and commitment to comprehensive solutions to the open-door dilemma. On the other hand, leaders who did not support those kinds of ideals seemed to contribute to feelings of vulnerability, confusion, and general dissatisfaction. Passivity among administrators with respect to the problems associated with academic underpreparedness tended to encourage teachers to gravitate toward passive responses, perpetuating what was perceived to be an uneasy status quo. Throughout the data there was a pervasive sense of a desire for more dynamic leadership and a more open acknowledgement of the difficult problems identified in this study, a desire for more proactive, substantive approaches. The general view seemed to be that the typical administrator could do more as a leader and as a catalyst for change.

Responses and Coping Strategies

The data indicated that teaching in an environment where there are many underprepared students is a task that carries with it special problems and demands which often tax the adaptive capacities of teachers. Analysis of the ways subjects

attempted to manage and cope with those problems and demands revealed three sub-categories: (a) responses and coping strategies involving teaching behaviors and activities, (b) responses and coping strategies involving course content, and (c) responses and coping strategies involving evaluation.

Responses and Coping Strategies Involving Teaching Behaviors and Activities

Remediating. Faculty typically stated that a great many students with remedial needs were encountered in regular courses. There was evidence of significant involvement in remediation in the regular curriculum and significant reductions in course content relative to prescribed syllabi. All interviewees expressed concern about the number of students with remedial needs and the pressing need for teachers to somehow respond. The majority said they did engage in what they considered to be remedial or compensatory education in their classes.

For example, a kid doesn't know how to take notes, or several students keep asking me to repeat things.... Sometimes you have to go back and have him do a little work on his basic skills, such as, uh, reading or writing, note taking. (D.4.1)

It's something that builds over a long period of time, and you can't just expect to fix that in a couple of [remedial] courses, for a lot of the students anyway. So, there is some taking up of the slack. And, uh, you do have to spend more time than what I'd really like to explaining concepts that I feel like they should already have. But I, I do it. I go ahead and do it. (L.2.11)

But it does use up a lot of time, and I, uh, realize that I'm not covering what I'd really like to because I'm having to explain this, this factoring technique again, when I know their 9th grade algebra teacher was out there trying to teach them that, you know. And, they spent all the time. And, then they went through the developmental!, and they were supposed to get it then and they didn't get it then, and here we are going at it again. We're beat'n it to death, and they're still not getting it. (L.3.1)

Flexibility-Adaptability. Many participants spoke of a need to be flexible and adaptable in their approach to teaching, and there was evidence that they were highly adaptive and made valiant efforts to address problems in more positive ways, stressing personal creativity and innovativeness, while foregoing the easy convenience of pure compromise and accommodation.

What I end up doing is reducing the number of papers, and I changed the way I taught.... I've changed it now so that I have a few in-class essays that will assess their skills in class very quickly. I only have them write six total essays, but four of them are revised—sometimes three times, sometimes twice—because I find that it takes that for them to start realizing. And, then I have them do a lot of peer reviews because I've found they needed the critical thinking skills about how to do the writing.... I try to do more where they're analyzing the text in depth, not just their own and their peers', but professionals.... As a result of their unpreparedness I've completely changed the way I have taught from what I first came here wanting to do. (H.6.2)

This kind of adjusting and adapting process seemed to be a key feature of a teaching environment dominated by academic underpreparedness. In the interview data there was frequent evidence of teachers struggling to bring their best creative energies to bear on the problem, in ways that often seemed to emphasize the human, artistic side of teaching.

I kind of feel like Don Quixote here.... My crusade is to make them naturally curious more than anything. (K.3.3)

Creative Interaction with Students. The classroom environment experienced by subjects was one in which they could not afford to employ a business as usual approach to teaching, given the high degree of academic and motivational diversity among students. Several respondents talked about how the open admission environment called for an expanded repertoire of interactional skills. The teacher, in order to perform optimally, had to go beyond the traditional role, not only teaching but also counseling, motivating, inspiring, negotiating, controlling, and so on.

It takes extra energy to teach at an open-door school, mainly because you have to do so much in the classroom every day. You have to teach ambition, you have to help them get a clearer picture of what they want. You have to teach them about what an education is, what it means. You have to teach them how to assume greater responsibility for their own education....so they might be more active learners. (D.6.3)

Responses and Coping Strategies Involving Course Content

The findings indicate, however, that creative and innovative efforts were largely foiled by the sheer magnitude of the problem. As several participants pointed out, the

cumulative effect on students of years of less than adequate academic preparation results in an enormous challenge for college teachers. They found themselves ill-equipped to cope fully. The ultimate result for many was a reluctant swing toward reactive kinds of coping strategies involving alterations in course content and grading practices. The majority reported that they had reduced or made other adjustments in the content of their courses in order to accommodate the general skill level of students. The kinds of adjustments reported seemed to involve one or both of two basic strategies—less breadth-more depth and adding remedial content.

Less Breadth and More Depth. Several teachers said they had reduced course content or had opted to teach less in content in order to emphasize or cover in more depth what they considered to be the more essential areas of the course.

I still insist on teaching college level work. The quantity—let me put it this way—the scope of the material that I cover in my class has diminished considerably over the last 5 to 6 years.... I'm...spending more time on less material. (K.2.3)

I have cut back tremendously on it [the syllabus].... I think everybody in this department has.... The consensus among the teachers here is that in order to teach them more, you've got to cover less.... Most of us in this department are radically cutting back on the amount of material that we used to cover and trying to cover the stuff that we do in much greater detail, so they come out knowing something as opposed to a little bit of nothing. (I.7.2)

Adding Remedial Content. Several subjects reported offering what they considered to be remediation. Some indicated that they offered remedial content routinely, so much so that they had come to regard a certain amount of remediation as a regular feature of some courses.

Some of the students may not be ready for what you're supposed to be teaching.... Do you just ignore them and go on and teach what you're supposed to teach, or do you decide that you're going to cover material that properly isn't in that curriculum.... (C.1.2)

Responses and Coping Strategies Involving Evaluation

The majority of participants indicated that they were troubled by grade inflation

and that academic underpreparedness affected the ways they evaluated students. Almost all indicated that they felt compelled to lower expectations and thus modify evaluation and grading, at least to some degree, relative to their own subjective standards. The various influences and pressures that come to bear on the teacher with respect to the evaluation process were separated into two categories: external and internal.

External Influences and Pressures. Findings indicated that pressure to inflate grades resulted, to a significant degree, from factors external the teacher. The basic situational pressure to accommodate the general skill level encountered in the classroom was the main factor affecting evaluation of students.

I've been here for 7 or 8 years. I do remember the first semester I gave almost everybody an F. And, the department head called me.... He asked me what was wrong, why was everyone in my class making F. And I said, "Well, they don't know the material. And, I taught them. I put my 100% in." He told me, "Well, you came from [deleted] University, and you can't expect everybody to be at that level." But, it didn't make any sense to me at all. When, uh, you come to university you have some sort of expectations about students.... He told me that I needed to take it easy.... I guess I began to understand that you cannot expect, uh, something from students that is simply beyond them. They just don't know that much. It's a problem with the open door. No selection. It's good because you give everybody a chance. But, it creates a difficult situation. (B.1.2, 1.4)

Other teachers talked about more subtle messages and cues that tended to affect the evaluation process. The administration was identified as a source of external pressure.

We also sometimes get some pressure from the administration not to fail so many students.... Very indirectly. It's not something that anybody just tells you.... It just kind of [pause] comes around [laugh]. (C.7.2, 7.4)

A number of faculty described how students themselves, through certain actions or certain implicit or explicit expectations, exerted pressure on the grading process.

Some students have come to me before and wanted to know why I didn't...pass them.... They act as if there's something wrong with me...as if...[they are saying] "I paid my tuition. Now where is my degree?" ...That's how the game is played. You do everything I tell you to do and you come to class and whether you're really educated, whether you really know the material or not, you get passed (G.8.3).

Several subjects raised the issue of student evaluations of faculty, suggesting that faculty awareness of what those evaluations can mean may also be a factor that influences evaluation.

I do think that some faculty grade fairly easily because, when you look at the reward system, these evaluations do impact whether or not people do get promotions and tenure. To get a good, good evaluation, you've got to be well liked. Junior faculty, in particular, think that to be well liked they've got to give easy grades. Unfortunately, that's part of the reward system. It is a pressure. I mean, ultimately, you have to look at your own career. (N.4.2)

I don't give grades away. The students get angry. The only way they can get back at me is when it's time to evaluate me. (B.3.3)

Internal Influences and Pressures. Faculty spoke of their own attitudes and philosophical orientations with respect to evaluation in an open-admission environment. To varying degrees they expressed empathy with underprepared students. Several spoke of internal pressures that affected their response to seniors and other students who were approaching the completion of their degree requirements, even though they might not be performing well academically.

The first year or two I never would have done this. But, I've noticed that, over the years, for graduating seniors [pause] my standards have gone down about [pause] whatever average they have to have because now I just feel like, well, I'm holding them up from getting on with their lives and, and everybody else has said this, this terrible level of performance is O.K. for this university.... There comes a point where I say, "What's the point. They've gotten this far. Why should I stop them this last semester?" (G.14.3)

Opinions, Values and Feelings Relevant to Salient Issues

The third major category of participants' experience with academic underpreparedness—the opinions, values, and feelings category—is more interpretative but is grounded, of course, in the perspectives of the participants. The focus was on how participants viewed the problem on a more personal level and what they thought could be done about it. Data analysis revealed a number of issues which seemed to be particularly important elements of the faculty experience with academic

underpreparedness. Analysis indicated that these salient issues could be meaningfully subsumed under three sub-categories: (a) the open admission dilemma, (b) the personal dilemma, and (c) prescriptive measures.

The Open Admission Dilemma

All of the teachers interviewed were in accord philosophically with the fundamental aims of the open admission concept.

I'm enough of a Jacksonian to believe that, uh—I don't have any trouble with, uh, being an open door university. I think any student with GED or a high school diploma, uh, should be given a chance at an education. (J. 1.1)

Standards. Despite the characteristics of the average student at open-door colleges and the student-centered ethos of those institutions, the issue of academic standards emerged as the most troubling to participants. The inherent conflict between underpreparedness and academic standards tended to create an uncomfortable situation for the teacher, for some a generally unpleasant predicament which was further complicated by a lack of administrative guidance and support. Although they appreciated the spirit and intent of open admissions, they often voiced strong opinions about declining standards and about what they perceived as a dubious administrative preoccupation with maintaining enrollment at excessively high levels. The majority touched on the quality versus quantity issue, the dilemma inherent therein, and how they saw themselves as being affected. Academic standards and the quality of education available to all students were clearly at the forefront of their concerns.

Many participants expressed the view that standards could be elevated without abdicating the universities' basic missions. Their words are illustrative of the prevailing view of what open admissions should mean and of the common perception that the full promise of open admissions remains unfulfilled.

So, once we set an open-door policy, it does not mean open-door grades. You know, you just come and get your diploma. That's all you have to do. It does not mean that. It means that you are giving, an opportunity to some disadvantaged students, equal to those who aren't disadvantaged at all. But, if they come here at a disadvantage, they should know that they're going to have to work harder.

And, we should be there to help them. But, unfortunately, it's not like that. (B.6.1)

I believe this system has developed in such a way that it favors the students' interests, which is mainly to make passing grades and graduate, rather than...to give students a quality education and encourage them to do the best work they can do. This is what I believe. This system does not want you to have a high standard. (B.5.4)

I've only been teaching consistently since graduate school, so let's say 8 or 9 years, and I can honestly tell you that in those 8 or 9 years I have seen a precipitous decline in the quality of students. My experience is that I have dumbed-down my classes. (K.2.3)

I really don't feel there has been that strong a commitment toward doing what is necessary toward bringing students up to...an acceptable level.... It's a numbers game. "Don't weed them out. Bring them in. Keep the money rolling in." (N.2.3)

How Traditional Students Are Affected. The majority of participants tended to characterize the general student population as lacking in preparedness, with students fitting the more traditional profile falling into a small minority. Interview data suggested that this resulted in a situation where teachers tried to find a proper middle ground between the two distinctly different types of students with distinctly different needs. The emphasis necessarily fell on the less prepared majority. The more able students were perceived as undergoing somewhat of a transformation over a period of time, becoming more like the majority of students around them. This was clearly distressing to those who described the phenomenon.

I think it's a little unfair to the students who are prepared—me having to spend so much time with those who aren't.... If I'm sitting in a situation where I know half the class is not ready for it and half the class is ready to go on, then which half would I rather just address...? (E.7.3)

They don't learn like they could.... As the year progresses they're not working as hard because they don't have to.... So, it affects them too, and that's discouraging. (G.8.3)

The Role of Developmental Education. Participants recognized the special mission of open-admission colleges and universities, the attendant need for a measure of remedial

emphasis, and the important role that developmental education plays in an open-admission setting. Despite that, they generally exhibited a mood of skepticism in regard to the effectiveness of remedial programs and, aside from the remedial aspect of the field of developmental education, there was a notable lack of awareness of its broader purposes and goals. There was also little evidence of meaningful interaction with developmental educators. These findings suggest that there was a failure to capitalize on developmental education as a specialized field which could aid faculty members in their efforts to reach students who were academically underprepared.

You really cannot fix in a year or year-and-a-half the deficiencies that have accumulated over the last 12 years. Uh, you just cannot remedy that. Now, they may be able to learn some things. But still, when you get in courses where the true understanding of concepts is tested at the higher level, you find out that they still haven't mastered everything, really. They may have done enough to get through an exam that allowed them to exit the developmental program. But...they are not what I would consider proficient, acceptable. Now, I just don't think that remediation at the college level is, is enough to fix what is missed in 12 years. (E.2.1)

I don't like it [developmental program] in that I think that the students are spending a lot of money to get what they should have learned before they came here. I think that it detracts from the resources and from financial resources that could be better spent on students who are better prepared to handle a rigorous baccalaureate curriculum.... This state needs to invest in community colleges and place those colleges...where the students come from. Make them accessible, to offer not just college track course work and remedial courses but also specific trades and vocational course work to teach people specific skills, people who would not come to college if they had other alternatives. Because, let's face it, not everyone is going to want or is going to be capable of obtaining a true college degree. You know, what we've done really, I think, to a certain extent, is we've been forced to dumb down the curriculum. (N.2.5)

I haven't talked to any faculty or staff over there [in the developmental area]. I really don't know too much about what they're doing. Not [much interaction there between developmental faculty and regular faculty] to my knowledge. And, I think it would be good if there was.... Sometimes we do wonder [laugh] what they're teaching over there. And, sometimes you get students who will let you know they've been in developmental, and it looks like they have learned something. I, I'm very ignorant about what goes on in that area. (C.3.6, 4.3)

There's not [much interaction occurring between developmental educators and other faculty]. But...I don't think that it's an intentional neglect.... They [developmental faculty] are isolated.... I think that they serve a role and that I

wouldn't even mind being involved in that role, because I have sympathy for the students. (H.9.5)

The Personal Dilemma

As higher education struggles with the problems associated with the mingling of egalitarian and meritocratic ideals, the individual teacher struggles with the problem personally. Subjects seemed to have much in common in regard to the problems and demands related to open admissions; however, many obviously felt that they were confronting those problems and demands individually and in relative isolation through a personal process of adaptation involving a good deal of trial-and-error. This process seemed to involve some redefining of the teacher role and a reassessment of personal values related to teaching and learning. The process of adjustment was for some confusing and emotionally trying, especially when there was little guidance and affirmation from administrators and more experienced colleagues. All respondents had something to say about the inner struggles and pressures they experienced in trying to reconcile equity and excellence.

Role Ambiguity. Several respondents expressed feelings of ambiguity and confusion with respect to their roles as college teachers. One seemed in somewhat of a quandary over what to expect of students in terms of academic quality. She was concerned about maintaining a collegiate standard. At the same time, however, she was bothered by what she perceived to be an unusually high drop rate and seemed to have some doubt about what was appropriate to require of students. She also expressed feelings of ambiguity in regard to her teaching role and seemed to have been drawn into anxious reflection, self-assessment, and a general reappraisal of what it meant to be a college teacher.

I'm confused about what I should expect from students. Is it unreasonable for me to give essay tests, ask students to read the text and answer questions, write about what they've read? Should I assign an article or two of outside reading? Some students handle that fine. But, that's not the average student. And, I'm not just talking about freshman and sophomores.... When I do give a challenging assignment, I'm setting myself up for a disappointment.... As a result, I seem to

give fewer and fewer assignments like that, that require the student to more or less take charge and work and crank out something that is meaningful.... It's an indication, I think, of a severe lack of critical thinking skills. These skills just haven't been developed. They haven't had the practice. These kids have watched a hell of a lot of TV. They had very little of the mental stimulation associated with reading, writing, having to stretch themselves academically. That's why I'm kind of bewildered. I keep asking myself—you know, here they are—this is college, isn't it? I'm not at all sure what that is anymore. But, here they are in college and what do I as a college teacher do? (M.2.3)

Value Conflicts. There was evidence of significant conflict between faculty values related to education and those generally held by students, and between faculty values and actual behavior. The prevailing value orientation of students with respect to education was perceived quite negatively by participants and was in conflict with their attitudes and values.

I didn't have an easy life as far as my education, and so I basically pulled myself up by my bootstraps because I didn't have a family that encouraged higher education. And so, I'm expecting them to do the same, to realize that, that this education is for them and that there is a lot more if they'll just give it a chance—that it's going to make them grow and be more complete. And, I don't see that. They look at it as a means to an end, and I look at it as being, just, well, just a, a continuing process. (H.5.1)

Participants also described negative effects associated with engaging in behaviors which were inconsistent with their values.

I'm doing things that I said I would never do, graduating or passing people that really don't know very much at all. And I...see on TV about how a college degree now is equivalent to a high school degree and I say, "Yeah, I'm part of it. I passed somebody that I really shouldn't have passed." ...I feel like, uh, I'm drawn into this system.... [I feel] lousy [laugh]. Awful. I mean awful to the point where, you know, I lie awake at night thinking about it and wanting to get out of the situation a lot of times. (G.15.3)

Job Attitudes. The general mood of the subjects, collectively speaking, was not upbeat and positive. But, despite the many negative comments about the quality of students, they seemed for the most part to have favorable attitudes toward and a deep sense of commitment to the teaching profession. Several participants, however, expressed some concern that the large number of poorly prepared students in their

classes was contributing to a deterioration in their attitudes toward their jobs.

I feel, from time to time, I've just about had enough.... I've seen faculty members who suffer from burnout.... I'd rather get out. Well, it's no secret, I am looking to get out. (A.3.4)

Despite experiencing some of the negative effects of academic underpreparedness on their job attitudes, several respondents seemed to key on those aspects of their work that tended to bolster somewhat their attitudes and general outlook.

I have enough good students coming here, as I said, to keep me just motivated enough to go on. (E.16.1)

In the end thought there are those who will appreciate being challenged. And, that's really important to me.... It's refreshing that a few, but it's almost not enough. It's enough to, to keep teaching. But, it makes it really discouraging, I think. (H.12.1)

Emotional Responses. Some faculty seemed to be noticeably affected on a personal level by their encounter with academic underpreparedness. Although the majority did not describe themselves as being deeply affected emotionally by the problem, there were a number of reports of fairly strong emotional responses.

It causes me great consternation.... I'm an emotional wreck, if you want to know the truth. (A.3.4)

I know too many teachers, and I'm one of them, that have suffered from depression as a result of it. Because, you just feel like, what's the use.... I get really concerned for my students.... I guess I'm always equating their ability with my ability to teach. If they're not progressing, I assume that it's my, my fault, even though I know that a lot of the time it's their attitudes that are the problem. (H.3.3, 4.8)

Others seemed to be able to remain more detached, more clinical in their approach to their work and seemed less affected emotionally and less apt to take student shortcomings as a personal failure.

Prescriptive Measures

All participants expressed some vision of a better teaching and learning environment for the open-admission institution—a vision of what ought to be or could be. These varied and wide-ranging ideas and opinions were often juxtaposed with

views on what was wrong with the system. Participants expressed their views on prescriptive measures—in addition to the need for more resources and problems with leadership—which might be generically applicable to the open-door dilemma. These excerpts are representative of the kinds of things participants said about prescriptive measures for open-admission institutions in general. An interesting aspect of these comments was the general sense of fragmentation and disunity which many saw as a major problem.

Admittedly, we have open admissions, and historically the institution has accepted anyone who has a high school diploma and can afford to pay the fees. Uh, if that's the way we're going to run it, we have to set up guidelines that ensure that those individuals who met those initial requirements are eliminated from the process immediately if they can't hold up.... We're not doing that. We're still...a continuum of what happens in high school, in my opinion. This is really nothing but a higher level of a high school. But, these are adults. We don't assist them in making them the kind of adult that can be successful. (A.2.6, 3.2)

I think it takes an attempt by all members of a department to keep [pause] the academic standards at a certain level. (G.11.3)

I feel that, uh, this state really does need a community college system. I don't think that people who do have remedial needs should be in a degree program for sure, and I think there needs to be some way to prepare them better. The public schools, for various reasons, are not going to prepare people for academic tracks in four-year institutions. (N.1.2)

I am sure, if we all get together and collectively try and do something about it, then the open-door policy can be a good idea. Students might learn to their potential. But, you have to make them do certain things.... It's a big, big problem, and we should try and approach it like thoughtful adults. Sounds simple and easy, but I realize the political overtones with this and most other big issues that affect a lot of people. We play games. Politics usually wins out—or complicates, I should say—the simple, straightforward approaches. (B.7.5)

By yourself, as individuals, you can't do much. I think everybody has to kind of be on the same wave length. I think it requires leadership, strong leadership and institutional commitment. (M.4.5)

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